# From Inquiry to Impact: Strengthening Research Methodology for African International Trade Studies in Undergraduate Business Education

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**Cite as:**
SANGWA, S., & MUTABAZI, P. (2025). From Inquiry to Impact: Strengthening Research Methodology for African International Trade Studies in Undergraduate Business Education. In Journal of Ethical Innovation and Impact (Vol. 1, Number 2, pp. 1–22). Center for Faith and Work. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15570125

**Abstract:** This paper explores the enduring challenges and transformative possibilities of undergraduate research methodology training in African international business and trade programs. In response to widespread concerns about superficial research output, low policy relevance, and epistemological alienation, the study critically examines how student inquiry can evolve into impactful, context-sensitive scholarship. Drawing exclusively on secondary data, the paper synthesizes institutional case studies, global pedagogical innovations, and philosophical frameworks to propose a conceptual model for contextualized research pedagogy. Anchored in postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy—particularly the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Paulo Freire, and Frantz Fanon—the study argues for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, applied research design, and mentorship reform into undergraduate curricula. Four major findings emerge: persistent methodological weaknesses, the marginalization of African epistemologies, structural constraints in supervision, and the limited linkage between student research and national trade agendas such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The paper proposes a layered model of reform combining curricular redesign, co-supervision models, industry linkages, and policy integration pathways. Through comparative insights from global South institutions and a proposed research-to-policy impact pathway, the study positions undergraduate research as a strategic lever for institutional innovation and developmental relevance. It concludes with targeted recommendations for academic leaders, policymakers, and educators seeking to transform business research education into a tool of African agency, economic reform, and epistemic sovereignty.

**Keywords[3]:** African higher education, undergraduate research pedagogy, international trade education, AfCFTA and student research, decolonizing research methods, research supervision reform, postcolonial curriculum design.

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[3] Received on May 09th, 2025. Accepted on June 1, 2025. Published on June 1, 2025. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.15570125. ISSN:2788-709X. ©Sixbert Sangwa & Placide Mutabazi. This paper is published under the CC-BY licence agreement

## I. Introduction

African nations are increasingly seeking deeper economic integration and stronger global trade partnerships, notably through continental initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). To realize these ambitions, countries must invest not only in logistics and diplomacy but also in intellectual infrastructure—particularly research. At the heart of this infrastructure lies higher education, and more specifically, the undergraduate programs that shape the analytical mindset of future trade professionals. In international business and trade programs across the continent, research methodology training should serve as a crucible where students learn to question, investigate, and generate knowledge that can inform both business strategy and policy. Yet despite this potential, there remains a disconnection between Africa's developmental needs and the current state of research education at the undergraduate level (Teferra, 2015).

Sub-Saharan Africa contributes over 13% of the global population but produces less than 1% of the world's research output (World Bank, 2022). This discrepancy is often attributed to postgraduate underfunding or lack of doctoral-level capacity, but less attention is given to the foundational phase: undergraduate research training. Evidence from multiple African universities reveals systemic challenges in how research is taught and supervised. Undergraduate research projects, particularly in business schools, frequently suffer from methodological weaknesses, limited contextual relevance, and a lack of innovation (Mawoli, 2022; Adom et al., 2016). These issues are compounded by overburdened faculty, inadequate mentorship systems, scarce academic resources, and curricula that remain disconnected from Africa's trade realities (Tijani, 2020; Mohamedbhai, 2019). Even where students are required to complete a final-year project or thesis, many do so with minimal critical engagement or methodological rigor. As a result, undergraduate research is often treated as a bureaucratic hurdle rather than a transformative educational experience.

These challenges are not merely technical—they are philosophical. They stem from inherited pedagogical traditions and epistemological models that often privilege foreign paradigms and overlook the rich intellectual heritage and socio-economic needs of the African context (Hountondji, 1997; Zeleza, 2009). If undergraduate research is to have meaningful impact—on students, institutions, and national policy—it must be reframed through a lens that values inquiry, relevance, and intellectual sovereignty. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues, the decolonization of African knowledge systems requires a fundamental rethinking of what counts as legitimate knowledge and who defines it. The

current status quo, inherited from colonial educational frameworks, continues to produce graduates who may be technically proficient but epistemologically alienated from the challenges and opportunities of their societies. While prior studies have highlighted the general challenges of African research capacity, few have specifically examined how research methodology is taught and supervised at the undergraduate level within international trade programs. This paper fills that gap by offering a cross-contextual, pedagogically grounded, and philosophically anchored analysis that links student research practices to broader policy and institutional development goals.

The central aim of this study is therefore to examine the methodological and institutional weaknesses that hinder undergraduate research quality, and to propose reforms that respond to the African context while remaining globally rigorous. Specifically, the paper seeks to: (1) analyze the current pedagogical and supervisory practices in undergraduate business and trade programs across African universities; (2) reflect philosophically on the place of research within postcolonial African education and its role in shaping both student identity and national policy; (3) identify and evaluate novel instructional strategies, supervisory innovations, and institutional support mechanisms that can enhance undergraduate research training; and (4) explore how improved undergraduate research outcomes can influence trade policy development and Africa's broader role in the global knowledge economy.

To address these objectives, the following guiding research questions frame the inquiry: First, what are the dominant weaknesses in undergraduate research methodology training within African international trade programs? Second, how can pedagogical and supervisory approaches be adapted to reflect the continent's postcolonial realities and economic priorities? Third, what emerging innovations—whether curricular, institutional, or technological—hold promise for transforming the quality and relevance of undergraduate research? And fourth, in what ways can stronger undergraduate research capacity translate into real-world impact, including policy engagement, institutional reform, and continental competitiveness in global trade?

## II. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design based solely on secondary data analysis. Given the focus on understanding and reforming research pedagogy in African undergraduate trade education, the interpretive approach enabled a deep exploration of how meaning is constructed within educational systems and policy frameworks. Secondary data was appropriate for this inquiry due to the abundance of existing scholarly and

institutional literature on research education, trade policy, and African higher education reforms, which allowed for thematic synthesis across diverse contexts. This approach also minimized bias and enabled access to well-established trends and critiques across countries and disciplines.

Data sources included peer-reviewed academic journals, policy reports from institutions such as the African Union and World Bank, as well as official documentation from African universities, including course outlines, research guidelines, and institutional strategies. To ensure analytical rigor and relevance, only sources published between 2013 and 2024 were included. Preference was given to Q1-ranked journals, global development reports, and official university documentation. Sources were excluded if they lacked methodological transparency, were anecdotal in nature, or did not focus on pedagogy, African contexts, or trade-related disciplines.

To guide the thematic synthesis, a question-driven coding process was employed. The four research questions shaped the categorization of insights around student learning challenges, pedagogical philosophies, emerging innovations, and policy implications. Rather than quantifying trends, the study critically interrogates the underlying epistemological and institutional assumptions that frame research training in African business schools. Comparative insights from global regions such as Southeast Asia and Latin America were also integrated to contextualize African trajectories within broader pedagogical shifts in international business education. By combining philosophical reflection, institutional case analysis, and normative critique, this methodology supports the paper's aim of advancing a grounded, transformative model for undergraduate research training in Africa.

## III. Findings and Discussions

The findings of this study are organized around four major themes that reflect the research questions and illuminate the key challenges and opportunities in African undergraduate research methodology training. First, the paper examines prevailing pedagogical and institutional barriers that weaken the quality and relevance of student research, responding directly to the question of dominant methodological weaknesses. Second, it explores the philosophical underpinnings of research education, showing how postcolonial theory can inform pedagogical renewal, aligning with the call to adapt supervision and curriculum to African realities. Third, emerging innovations in curriculum design, supervision models, and technological tools are reviewed as possible solutions to strengthen research training. Fourth, case examples and global comparisons are analyzed to assess how reforms at the undergraduate level can influence broader policy and institutional

outcomes. Together, these themes provide a coherent and critical discussion that addresses the core research questions and advances a forward-looking framework for reform.

### 3.1. Pedagogical Challenges

A critical starting point is diagnosing why undergraduate research outputs have often been weak in African international business and trade programs. Multiple studies indicate that students struggle with research projects due to gaps in both skills and support. In many curricula, research methodology is introduced late and taught in a theoretical manner, leaving students ill-prepared to design and execute their own studies (Naicker & Singh, 2022). Foundational knowledge in epistemology, research design, and data analysis may be cursory. As a result, when final-year students embark on required projects about, say, the impact of trade policy on local businesses or an analysis of export market trends, they often resort to superficial approaches – copying past projects, relying on anecdotal evidence, or misapplying statistical tools. A qualitative evaluation in a South African university highlighted that undergraduates had *"limited foundational research knowledge"*, which hindered their engagement in an industry-based research project (Naicker & Singh, 2022). This finding echoes across institutions: without early and hands-on research training, students lack the confidence and competence to conduct independent inquiry.

Supervision practices and workload further compound the problem. In numerous African universities, a single faculty member may supervise dozens of undergraduate projects concurrently, far above the internationally recommended ratios (Mawoli, 2022). This overstretch means supervisors cannot provide meaningful guidance on refining research questions, choosing appropriate methodology, or ensuring academic integrity. A Nigerian study recommended that universities *"trim down annual enrolment to attain the ideal student–staff ratio of 30:1"* for project supervision (Mawoli, 2022). In reality, ratios are often much higher, particularly in popular fields like business administration, where one lecturer might be assigned 50–100 undergraduate dissertations. Overburdened supervisors may resort to a perfunctory oversight role, signing off on poorly executed work with minimal feedback. The lack of formal training for supervisors in mentorship techniques exacerbates this issue – many faculty supervise by rote, repeating the way they were guided (or not guided) during their own student days, perpetuating a cycle of weak supervision.

Students' own attitudes and preparedness also play a role. Research from multiple African institutions, including medical and nursing programs, points to student factors like low

motivation, anxiety about research, and misconceptions about the research process as barriers. Delport et al. (2023) identify *"lack of initiative*" and *"lack of incentive"* among the *"Four I's"* that summarize barriers to undergraduate research engagement in Africa (Delport et al., 2023). Many undergraduates view the research project as a hurdle to graduation rather than a learning opportunity, especially if they do not see research skills as relevant to their future careers in trade or business. This mindset can be traced in part to pedagogical shortcomings: if coursework has emphasized rote learning over critical thinking, students may find the open-ended nature of research daunting. In some cases, students resort to plagiarism or commissioning work due to desperation or poor ethical grounding. Plagiarism, in fact, has been reported as a pervasive challenge in African higher education, fueled by easy internet access to papers and a lack of stringent enforcement of academic integrity policies (Delport et al., 2023). A study at the Open University of Tanzania found high incidence of plagiarism and attributed it to students' poor writing skills and inadequate access to relevant literature, combined with insufficient oversight by supervisors (Delport et al., 2023). Such trends undermine the educational value of undergraduate research and damage the credibility of the programs.

Another core challenge is the limited resources and infrastructure to support student research. Comprehensive libraries, access to academic databases, and research software are unevenly available across African universities. Students in well-resourced institutions (often private or flagship public universities) might have access to journal repositories and data sources (e.g., trade statistics from UNCTAD or the World Bank), whereas those in smaller or underfunded universities struggle to obtain basic reference materials. A lack of locally relevant case studies and data is also problematic; business students in Africa often rely on Western textbooks and case examples, which may not translate well to African trade contexts (Mawoli, 2022). This *"dearth of business case studies in Nigeria"* and other African countries has been noted as a barrier to contextual learning (Mawoli, 2022). When students cannot find literature or examples related to African trade issues – for instance, analyses of intra-African export challenges or local firm case studies – they find it more difficult to formulate impactful research questions or to situate their work in existing knowledge. The outcome is often perfunctory projects that rehash generic business theory without meaningful application to African realities.

| **Theme** | **Key Challenges** | **Proposed Pedagogical or Policy Reform** |
|---|---|---|
| Methodological Weaknesses | Surface-level research designs; limited originality; | Redesign curriculum to embed research early; emphasize trade-relevant |

| | | |
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| | lack of trade-specific focus in student projects. | inquiry; encourage interdisciplinary framing. |
| Epistemological Alienation | Overreliance on Eurocentric methods; marginalization of African philosophies and trade practices. | Integrate indigenous epistemologies and postcolonial theory into research methods training. |
| Weak Supervision Structures | High faculty workload; transactional feedback; limited mentoring structures. | Adopt co-supervision models; train faculty in formative mentorship; establish research communities of practice. |
| Policy Disconnect / Low Institutional Impact | Student research often detached from AfCFTA priorities, national trade policy, or community relevance. | Create trade-focused research labs; align capstone topics with national development plans; incentivize real-world impact. |

*Table 1: Challenges And Reforms In African Undergraduate Research*

In summary, the current pedagogical model in many African undergraduate trade programs leaves students underprepared and under-supervised for research. The weaknesses span multiple levels: individual (skills and motivation), interpersonal (student-supervisor interaction), and institutional (resources and curriculum design). These findings are not meant to generalize across the entire continent uniformly – there are certainly pockets of excellence and numerous dedicated educators – but the documented trends point to systemic issues. Recognizing these pedagogical challenges is a prerequisite to designing effective solutions. The next sections will delve into deeper reflections on *why* research training has taken its current form in Africa, and how new approaches can address both the surface symptoms and underlying causes of underperformance in undergraduate research.

### 3.2. Decolonizing Research Education

Any effort to reform research methodology education in Africa must grapple with the broader historical and philosophical context of knowledge production on the continent. African universities today operate in a postcolonial environment where inherited Western educational models often prevail, sometimes at odds with local ways of knowing and local developmental needs. The role of research in African societies has been profoundly shaped by the colonial legacy: during the colonial era, research was frequently an extractive enterprise, with knowledge about Africa generated by and for outsiders, and with little concern for indigenous perspectives or local benefit (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). Decades after independence, many African scholars argue that


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vestiges of this legacy remain in how research is conceptualized and taught. There is a felt need to "decolonize" research methodologies – to move away from Eurocentric paradigms that *"undermine local knowledge and experiences"* and instead embrace approaches driven by African worldviews and communal values (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019).

One aspect of decolonizing research education is incorporating indigenous philosophies such as **Ubuntu** into the teaching of inquiry. Ubuntu, broadly meaning *"I am because we are,"* emphasizes community, interdependence, and respect for all human dignity. Applied to research, an Ubuntu-informed paradigm would encourage students to view knowledge creation not as an individual heroic endeavor, but as a collaborative, community-embedded process. This could reshape how undergraduates choose topics (focusing on community-relevant trade issues), how they collect data (with respect and reciprocity towards participants), and how they define the impact of their research (valuing social usefulness as much as academic contribution) (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). Scholars have noted that when researchers come from the community or culture being studied, *"questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently"* (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). By training African undergraduates to research *with* their communities – for example, a student investigating barriers faced by local entrepreneurs under a new trade agreement could involve those entrepreneurs in shaping the inquiry – research becomes a tool of empowerment rather than extraction. A decolonized pedagogy would also validate the use of African languages and terminologies in research where appropriate, and engage with African epistemologies (such as oral knowledge systems, proverbs, and communal consensus-building) as legitimate sources of insight alongside conventional literature.

Another philosophical consideration is the purpose of undergraduate research in a development context. In Western universities, undergraduate research is often justified as training for scholarly thinking or as a pipeline to graduate school. In Africa, while those goals are valid, there is an added moral imperative: research should tangibly contribute to solving Africa's developmental challenges. Postcolonial theorists emphasize that knowledge production should serve the public good and address issues of social justice, given the histories of exploitation. In the context of international trade studies, this means orienting student research to issues like poverty reduction through trade, fair trade practices, regional integration, and the impacts of globalization on local communities. When students engage in projects analyzing, say, the effects of an import ban on rural farmers or strategies for small businesses to access AfCFTA

markets, they are not just fulfilling an academic requirement – they are participating in conversations about Africa's economic future. This philosophical stance aligns with Africa's strategic vision documents such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which envisions an Africa that is *"a global knowledge powerhouse"* and calls for harnessing knowledge to drive inclusive development (African Union, 2024). In this light, teaching research methods is not merely a technical exercise but a form of capacity building for sovereignty and self-determination. It helps produce graduates who can critically analyze data and policies rather than passively consume externally produced analyses. Strengthening analytical support within African nations is crucial, as evidenced by past observations that countries like Nigeria lacked an indigenous *"structure of research and analytical support for trade policy-making"* (Ayuk & Marouani, 2007). Building that support begins with imbuing undergraduates with the skills and mindset to become knowledge producers for their own societies.

To be clear, a call for decolonizing research methodology is not a rejection of all established scientific methods or international standards. Rather, it is an argument for plurality and relevance. African students should certainly master global best practices in research design, statistics, and scholarly writing – these are transferable skills that allow them to engage peers worldwide. But they should also be encouraged to question assumptions embedded in those methods and adapt them to local realities. For instance, a common statistical approach in trade research might rely on data that are scarce or unreliable in many African contexts; students must learn creative methods for data collection or qualitative triangulation suitable for environments where official statistics are limited. Likewise, ethical research practice in Africa may require heightened attention to power imbalances between researcher and subject, given communities' historical apprehension of being "studied" by outside experts (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). Thus, an Afrocentric research pedagogy would blend rigorous training in methodology with critical reflection on context, encouraging what some have termed an *"indigenous lens"* at all stages of the research process (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019).

In summary, the postcolonial perspective underscores that reforming undergraduate research training is not only a pedagogical matter but also a project of cultural and intellectual liberation. By teaching students to value their own contexts and knowledge systems in the research process, African universities can produce graduates who are both methodologically skilled and philosophically grounded to use research as a tool for transformative impact. This philosophical stance sets the stage for the practical pedagogical innovations discussed in the next


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section, ensuring that those innovations are not just technocratic fixes but part of a larger vision of reclaiming research for Africa's development.

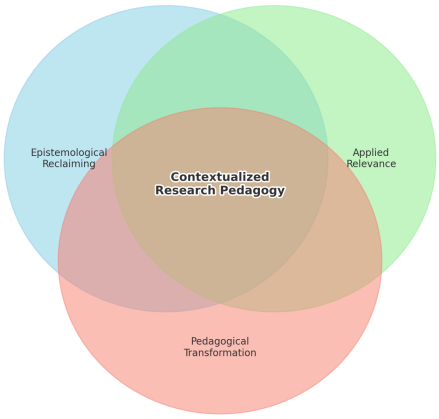


*Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Contextualized Undergraduate Research Pedagogy in Africa.*

This framework illustrates the intersection of three critical dimensions: epistemological reclaiming, applied relevance, and pedagogical transformation. At their convergence lies a decolonized, context-sensitive approach to undergraduate research training in international trade programs. This model emphasizes inquiry that is locally grounded, policy-aware, and pedagogically innovative—responding directly to Africa's evolving educational and developmental priorities.

### 3.3. Emerging Innovations

Confronting the aforementioned challenges demands reimagining how research is taught and supervised in undergraduate business education. Novel pedagogical approaches – some already being piloted in certain African institutions – offer promising avenues to strengthen students' research capabilities. This section outlines several key innovations: integrating research early in the curriculum, experiential and problem-based learning, enhancing supervision through mentorship models, leveraging technology, and institutional support mechanisms. Each innovation is connected to observed shortcomings and is designed to cultivate a more inquiry-driven, skill-oriented learning experience.

**Early Integration and Scaffolded Learning:** One of the strongest recommendations emerging from both literature and practice is to introduce research components much earlier in undergraduate programs, rather than deferring them to a capstone project in the final year. Students need gradual exposure to the research process – from formulating questions to gathering and analyzing data – in a scaffolded manner across their coursework. This can be achieved by embedding mini-research assignments in core courses. For example, in a Year 1 economics class, students might be tasked with a small project investigating a local market and writing a brief research report. In Year 2, a course on trade policy could require students to review academic articles and develop a research proposal on a trade issue. By Year 3, students would have practiced elements of research multiple times, making the final thesis far less daunting. Such progressive integration has been linked to improved confidence and


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competence. A recent qualitative study in Durban, South Africa, where undergraduates engaged in *"collaborative industry-based projects"* throughout the program, found that students developed a *"process-oriented approach to research"* and better data handling skills as a result (Naicker & Singh, 2022). The key is to shift from treating research as a one-time event to making it a continuous thread in the educational fabric. Some African universities are already moving in this direction. The African Leadership University (ALU), for instance, organizes its curriculum around "missions" and real-world projects rather than traditional siloed courses; students at ALU tackle challenges (many of which require research) from their first year, thereby organically building inquiry skills while pursuing solutions to African problems (ALU, 2025). Such models illustrate how early integration can reshape student attitudes – research becomes seen as a natural tool for problem-solving rather than an abstract academic requirement.

**Experiential and Problem-Based Learning:** Coupled with early integration is the emphasis on experiential learning – learning by doing, often in real-world settings. International business and trade are dynamic fields, and grounding research assignments in practical experience can be highly motivating for students. Universities can partner with industries, government agencies, or NGOs to create research opportunities that allow students to apply methods to live problems. For example, a business school might collaborate with a local export council so that students can conduct research on supply chain bottlenecks faced by exporters, with findings feeding back to the council. This aligns with the concept of *"industry-based projects"* that simultaneously give students hands-on experience and produce useful insights for stakeholders (Naicker & Singh, 2022). Participants in the Durban study cited earlier reported that working on real projects made the research process more engaging and helped them transfer classroom knowledge to higher-level skills (Naicker & Singh, 2022). Problem-based learning pedagogy, where a course is structured around solving a complex real-world problem, is another effective approach. In an international trade context, students might spend a semester devising a strategy for a hypothetical firm entering a new African market, which would entail researching cultural, economic, and regulatory factors. This strategy forces them to practice research competencies (like data collection and analysis) in a way that feels meaningful and immediately applicable.

**Mentorship and Supervision Reforms:** Addressing the supervision bottleneck is crucial. One innovative approach is moving from the traditional one-on-one model to a team-based mentorship model. In a team supervision system, a small group of students working on related topics could be supervised by a committee of faculty

or a mix of faculty and experienced graduate students. This not only spreads the supervisory load but also creates a community of inquiry among students. Peer learning can be powerful: students can critique each other's proposals, share resources, and hold one another accountable. For supervisors, working in teams can improve the consistency of guidance and reduce the likelihood that a student's project is neglected due to an individual lecturer's overload. Training programs for supervisors are also essential. Universities should establish workshops or short courses on effective undergraduate research supervision, focusing on mentoring techniques, giving constructive feedback, and ethical guidance. The call for *"train the trainers"* was a notable outcome of a 2025 Pan-African conference on AfCFTA and higher education, where experts urged raising awareness among academics through capacity-building programs so that faculty can better integrate contemporary trade issues and research skills into their teaching (OBREAL, 2025). Furthermore, incentives can be aligned by recognizing and rewarding good supervision. Currently, in many institutions, supervising undergrad theses is seen as a burdensome duty with few career rewards. Including quality of undergraduate supervision as a criterion in faculty evaluations or teaching awards could begin to change that narrative, motivating lecturers to invest more in their mentees.

**Leveraging Technology and Open Resources:** In the digital age, technological tools can significantly augment research training. Online modules and simulations can teach certain research concepts more effectively than lectures. For example, an interactive online tutorial on research ethics could walk students through case studies of ethical dilemmas in fieldwork. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a South African university experimented with a *"newly developed online research methodology module"* for undergraduates in a rehabilitation program, which provided insights into how blended learning can enhance research skills even when in-person interaction is limited (Louw et al., 2025). Virtual libraries and databases are another game-changer. Efforts should be made to provide all students with access to key research databases (through national licenses or partnerships with international libraries), so that even those in resource-poor settings can retrieve relevant literature. Moreover, training students in using statistical software or qualitative analysis software via e-learning platforms can standardize the skillset. Technology can also facilitate better supervision: regular virtual check-ins, feedback through document sharing, and plagiarism detection software (such as Turnitin) all contribute to a more rigorous and efficient supervision process. Notably, anti-plagiarism tools have been strongly recommended in studies diagnosing African research

quality issues (Mawoli, 2022). Mandating plagiarism screening for all submitted theses, as one Nigerian university has done, both deters misconduct and underscores to students the importance of original work (Mawoli, 2022). In sum, integrating appropriate technologies can overcome some infrastructural limitations and foster a more interactive, resource-rich learning environment for research.

**Institutional Support Structures:** Beyond classroom and supervision interventions, higher-level institutional reforms can create an enabling environment for undergraduate research. One exemplar is the establishment of an **Undergraduate Research Office (URO)** or similar bodies dedicated to supporting student research. Stellenbosch University's Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences created a URO that, over its first six years, demonstrably boosted undergraduate research output by organizing consultations, workshops, and even a dedicated ethics review process for student projects (Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). Between 2015 and 2020, this URO facilitated 259 undergraduate research projects and reviewed 243 ethics applications, with funding provided for many student-led studies(Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). The result was a more than doubling of undergraduate research presentations at the faculty's academic day, indicating heightened student engagement(Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). Such support structures are essential especially in large universities; they ensure that undergraduates have somewhere to turn for methodological advice, grant opportunities, or simply encouragement. Additionally, universities can institutionalize undergraduate research conferences or journals to showcase exemplary work. Seeing peers present at a conference or publish in a student research journal can motivate underclassmen to take their own projects seriously. This kind of recognition also bridges the gap between undergraduate and professional research – students begin to identify as part of the research community. Funding is another institutional piece: dedicating small research grants for undergraduate projects (even a few hundred dollars each) can enable field visits, surveys, or laboratory analyses that dramatically increase a project's quality. As reported from the Stellenbosch case, modest funding (approximately ZAR 706,000 in total across many projects) had a notable impact on facilitating conference presentations and publications by students(Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). In trade and business studies, universities could partner with development organizations or commerce ministries to sponsor student research on priority topics (for example, impact assessments of trade policies), aligning student learning with national research needs.

Crucially, all these innovations must be adapted to the local context of each institution. Africa's higher

education landscape is diverse – what works at a small private university might need modification for a sprawling public university and vice versa. Nonetheless, the underlying principle is consistent: a shift from passive, theory-heavy instruction to active, practical, and well-supported research learning. Implementing these changes is not without challenges – it requires administrative will, faculty buy-in, and often additional resources. Yet, the potential benefits in student development are substantial. When well-executed, these approaches produce graduates who are not only capable of conducting methodologically sound research but who also appreciate the value of research in driving innovation and policy.

### 3.4 Institutional Case Studies

To ground the discussion, we highlight a few cases from African universities that exemplify the spectrum of practices in undergraduate research methodology education – from problematic to exemplary. These cases illuminate how the challenges and innovations discussed above play out in real institutional contexts.

**Case 1: A Large Public University in Nigeria (Challenges of Scale)** – Public universities in countries like Nigeria enroll thousands of undergraduate business students each year, and nearly all are required to complete a final-year research project. The earlier referenced study by Mawoli (2022) examined six Nigerian public universities and painted a stark picture: many undergraduates' research projects were of poor quality, with evidence of declining standards over successive cohorts. Issues included rampant plagiarism, formulaic topics, and lack of robust data analysis. The study found that some departments allowed projects to be accepted without any originality checks or defenses, leading to recycled papers circulating year after year. In response, Mawoli's team recommended specific reforms: enforce strict *carrying-capacity* limits so that faculty are not supervising beyond a reasonable number of students; implement mandatory plagiarism testing before a thesis is approved for defense; and reinstitute the practice of oral defenses for undergraduate projects to ensure students can articulate and defend their work (Mawoli, 2022). One of the universities had already piloted a plagiarism screening and found it effective in identifying problematic submissions (Mawoli, 2022) . These steps, while basic, represent significant shifts for institutions that historically may have treated the undergraduate project as a mere formality. The Nigerian case underscores how systemic factors – like overcrowding and lack of accountability – can severely undermine research training, and how a return to fundamentals (smaller ratios, integrity checks, and rigorous evaluation) is a necessary starting point in such settings.

**Case 2: African Leadership University (Innovative Pedagogy)** – In contrast, the African Leadership University, with campuses in Rwanda and Mauritius, offers an example of innovation in curriculum design for undergraduate research. ALU's model is built on experiential learning and tackling real-world challenges. Students declare missions (problems they are passionate about solving) rather than traditional majors, and throughout their study they engage in projects, internships, and a final capstone closely tied to their mission (ALU, 2025). For International Business & Trade students, this might mean a mission such as "boosting renewable energy trade in East Africa," which guides their coursework and research. The pedagogy places heavy emphasis on self-directed learning, with faculty serving more as mentors than lecturers. Research methods are taught not only as a standalone course but applied immediately in mission-related projects. Because ALU limits its cohort size and uses a low student-to-faculty ratio, each student receives considerable guidance. Early evidence from ALU's outcomes suggests students produce highly practical research outputs – for instance, market entry strategies for actual companies or policy briefs for think tanks – indicating a high level of engagement and applicability. While ALU is atypical in its resources and design, it demonstrates how breaking the mold of traditional lecture-and-thesis can yield graduates who are creative researchers and problem solvers. The ALU case also highlights the benefit of drawing in external partners: many of their student projects are done in collaboration with companies or NGOs, which improves quality and impact by giving students access to data and expert feedback.

**Case 3: Stellenbosch University Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (Institutional Support)** – Mentioned earlier, Stellenbosch's Undergraduate Research Office (URO) is a case of an institutional innovation paying dividends (Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). Though in a health sciences context, the model is transferable to business faculties. The URO was created out of recognition that undergraduate students needed more support than what individual mentors could provide. It organized training workshops on research proposal writing, offered one-on-one consultations (covering everything from statistical help to writing tips), and facilitated a student research day where undergraduates could present their work. Over a six-year period, this systematic support correlated with a significant increase in the number and quality of undergraduate research projects. Importantly, the URO also liaised with other units like the ethics committee and funding bodies to streamline processes for students (Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). For example, they drastically cut down the wait time for ethical clearance of student projects to just 1–2 weeks, ensuring that ethical review – often a

bottleneck – did not stall student research timelines (Marais & Gey van Pittius, 2022). They also raised and allocated funds to student projects, addressing the resource gap. The success of this approach in a South African university suggests that even within resource-constrained African institutions, dedicating a small organizational unit to champion undergraduate research can yield measurable improvements. It professionalizes the undergraduate research experience, treating students as genuine contributors to academic output rather than transient learners. Business faculties elsewhere in Africa could emulate this by creating *"research method hubs"* that coordinate training sessions (perhaps inviting trade experts to speak), maintain a repository of past excellent theses for students to learn from, and help match students with research opportunities in the field.

**Case 4: Regional Partnerships and Networks** – Another noteworthy development is the emergence of regional networks aimed at strengthening research training. For example, the recent AfCFTA Higher Education initiative (2025) brought together university leaders and policymakers to discuss harmonizing curricula and leveraging AfCFTA for academic integration (Obreal, 2025). One outcome was a proposal for an Africa-wide *"train the trainers"* program, reflecting a realization that many faculty members themselves need upskilling on contemporary trade issues and research methodologies (Obreal, 2025). Likewise, the African Research and Innovation Hub announced by the African Export-Import Bank in 2025 aims to connect academia, industry, and policymakers at continental events (such as the Intra-African Trade Fair) (Afreximbank, 2025). Through this platform, lecturers and students from across Africa will showcase research and prototypes related to trade and industrialization, essentially creating an inter-university forum for applied research (Afreximbank, 2025). Such initiatives encourage cross-pollination of ideas and elevate the status of undergraduate research beyond the campus, showing students that their work can attract interest from investors and policy leaders. A student whose project on improving cross-border e-commerce is exhibited at a trade fair, for instance, gains validation and may pursue the work further post-graduation. These regional partnerships serve as external motivators for universities to improve their research training so that their students can compete and shine on larger stages.

Together, these cases illustrate that change is both necessary and possible. Large public universities grappling with quality issues can implement stricter policies and focus on basics to gradually raise standards (Case 1). Innovative institutions can experiment with pedagogy and serve as laboratories for new ideas (Case 2). Established universities can invest in support structures to institutionalize

quality improvements (Case 3). And at a continental level, collaborative efforts can create an ecosystem that values and rewards undergraduate research (Case 4). Each context will dictate a different mix of interventions, but the overarching lesson is that weaknesses in undergraduate research are not intractable. With targeted reforms, African universities can turn their undergraduate projects from a weak link into a cornerstone of academic excellence and relevance.

### 3.5. Policy and Practice Implications

Enhancing research methodology education at the undergraduate level is not an end in itself – its significance reverberates beyond academia, potentially influencing Africa's broader trade and development trajectory. Well-trained graduates are the seedlings of a robust knowledge society. As they enter the workforce, whether in the public sector, private enterprises, or civil society, their research mindset and skills can lead to more data-driven decision making and innovation. In the arena of international trade, where policies and business strategies must be guided by complex evidence, this could be transformative.

One direct impact is on **trade policy formulation**. Historically, many African governments have relied on external consultants or international organizations for research and analysis when designing trade agreements or negotiating at the World Trade Organization. Building in-house analytical capacity has been a challenge, with studies noting the absence of strong linkages between local research institutions and policymakers (Ayuk & Marouani, 2007). By empowering undergraduates with solid research skills, universities are essentially training the next generation of policy analysts and advisors. A graduate who has done a rigorous thesis on, say, the effects of non-tariff barriers on regional trade is a prime candidate to join a ministry's trade analysis unit or a think tank. Citing the earlier observation from Nigeria: there was "no identifiable source or structure of research and analytical support for trade policy-making" in the country, and it was suggested that *"specialized knowledge and skills"* be cultivated through academia and consulting networks (Ayuk & Marouani, 2007). Strengthening undergraduate research training directly contributes to this cultivation of specialized knowledge in local academia. Over time, as more graduates with research prowess populate key institutions, Africa can increasingly generate home-grown data and policy solutions. This aligns with the ethos of Agenda 2063, which emphasizes self-reliance and harnessing African expertise for African problems (African Union, 2024).

Improved undergraduate research training can also spur **institutional reforms** within higher education itself. As success stories emerge – for instance, departments

where nearly all students pass their thesis defenses with commendation, or universities where undergraduate research output is cited by policymakers – it creates positive pressure and a template for other departments to follow. The cultural shift toward valuing research at all levels can help African universities transition from a primary focus on teaching to a more balanced model of teaching and research. This does not only benefit students; it invigorates faculty as well. When faculty are engaged in mentoring quality research, they often become more research-active themselves, creating a virtuous cycle that elevates the university's overall academic standing. In international business education, this could mean African faculty producing more case studies, trade databases, and journal articles that draw from local realities, thereby enriching global knowledge with African perspectives. Some observers have pointed out that Africa's marginalization in global knowledge production is not due to lack of talent, but lack of systems that support that talent (Rivero, 2024). By reforming undergraduate research education, universities are building those supportive systems from the ground up.

Perhaps the most far-reaching implication is the potential shift in **Africa's position in the global economy** through a more evidence-based and innovation-driven approach. Trade and business are areas where innovation and strategy rely heavily on research – market research, R&D, policy impact studies, etc. If African businesses and governments increasingly employ graduates who know how to conduct and interpret research, we can expect more effective strategies that improve competitiveness. For example, a company expanding to a new African market might avoid costly mistakes if its team includes analysts skilled in conducting thorough market and regulatory research. On a policy level, consider the implementation of the AfCFTA itself: it involves complex adjustments and negotiations where robust data analysis of trade flows, local industries, and distributional effects is vital. African researchers with intimate knowledge of their economies are best positioned to perform this analysis. Already, the AfCFTA Secretariat and organizations like the African Union are actively seeking to involve African academia in these processes (OBREAL, 2025). The 2025 AfCFTA higher education conference conclusion stressed establishing "*bridges between African economic and higher education integration"* and promoting Africa-centered knowledge production for development (OBREAL, 2025). This signals high-level acknowledgment that academic training (including at undergraduate level) needs to feed into economic policy and vice versa. In this way, an undergraduate dissertation on a narrow topic – for instance, the efficiency of a cross-border trade corridor – could scale up its impact when the author's insights contribute to

a national policy review or an investment decision.

Moreover, empowering young researchers can help Africa tell its own economic story internationally. Often, narratives about Africa in global trade are shaped by foreign media or scholars. But as African undergraduates produce high-quality research and perhaps publish in international journals or present at conferences, they add authentic voices to global discourse. Their training in postcolonial critical thinking ensures they might question prevailing narratives and inject fresh perspectives. In essence, Africa's improved research capacity can challenge and enrich the global knowledge ecosystem, moving Africa from being a subject of study to a co-author of solutions in international business and trade.

It is also worth mentioning the potential social impact. When students undertake research that connects to their communities, they become conduits of knowledge back to those communities. A student who researches the challenges of local farmers accessing export markets might disseminate her findings in a community forum or through a policy brief to local authorities. This democratizes knowledge and ensures that research benefits do not stay confined to academia. Over time, as a research mindset penetrates society – where even entrepreneurs and local officials start valuing data and analysis – the culture of decision-making evolves. This is admittedly a long-term vision, but its seeds are planted in how we educate undergraduates today.

In conclusion of this section, strengthening undergraduate research methodology education is a leverage point that can yield multifaceted benefits: better academic outcomes for students, enhanced capacity for institutions, more adept professionals in the workforce, and more sovereign control over Africa's development narrative. While the focus of this article has been on international trade studies in business education, the core arguments resonate across disciplines – the competencies and critical outlook fostered through research training are universally applicable. The final section will summarize the main insights and reiterate the call to action for educators, administrators, and policymakers to invest in this foundational aspect of higher education.

## Conclusion

Undergraduate research methodology training in African international business and trade programs stands at a crossroads. For too long, it has been the Achilles' heel of the curriculum – a token requirement that yielded limited learning and even less impact. This article has argued that it is both possible and necessary to transform this weakness into a strength. By introducing innovative pedagogical approaches, contextualizing research in

postcolonial realities, and bolstering institutional support, African universities can graduate students who are not only competent researchers but also change agents equipped to drive economic development and policy innovation.

Key findings from our investigation highlight that current student research outputs suffer from inadequate preparation, overstretched supervision, and misalignment with local contexts. Philosophical analysis reveals that these issues are intertwined with the legacy of colonial education systems that sidelined indigenous knowledge and prioritized rote learning over critical inquiry. Confronting these intertwined pedagogical and epistemological challenges requires a holistic strategy. We need curricula that ignite curiosity early, teaching methods that engage with real-world African trade issues, mentorship models that nurture and inspire, and a research culture that prizes integrity and relevance. The examples from Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, and pan-African initiatives show that change is underway and offers roadmaps for others: whether through stricter quality controls and ethics or through radical curriculum redesign, improvements are achievable.

Importantly, the benefits of reform will extend beyond academic metrics. As we strengthen research methodology education, we lay the groundwork for a more knowledgeable and self-reliant Africa. Graduates who have learned *how* to learn, how to ask the right questions and systematically find answers, will be invaluable in all sectors. They will be the ones to conduct the feasibility studies for new trade logistics hubs, to analyze data for evidence-based trade negotiations, and to innovate business models that succeed in African markets. In a world increasingly driven by information and innovation, empowering our undergraduates with robust research skills is akin to equipping them with a form of economic agency. It ensures Africa can produce its own experts and solutions, rather than outsourcing its thinking.

Of course, executing the reforms discussed is not without challenges. It demands resources – financial, human, and material – and careful change management within institutions. Faculty may need convincing and retraining; class schedules might need overhauls to accommodate research projects; partnerships must be forged for experiential learning opportunities. But the vision of “from inquiry to impact” provides a compelling justification for these investments. African governments, educational authorities, and international supporters (such as the World Bank, UNESCO, or African Development Bank) should recognize undergraduate research capacity-building as a priority area for funding and technical assistance, on par with STEM initiatives or infrastructure development. Such support, combined with local leadership from university


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administrators and faculty champions, can accelerate the pace of change.

In final reflection, strengthening research methodology in undergraduate business education is more than an academic concern – it is a cornerstone for Africa's future in the global economy. It speaks to the heart of postcolonial aspirations: to produce knowledge on our own terms and translate it into prosperity and well-being. The undergraduate classroom is where the journey from inquiry to impact begins. By reshaping that journey to be more inclusive, rigorous, and connected to Africa's needs, we can ensure that the graduates of today become the trailblazers of tomorrow's African economic renaissance. This paper has laid out the rationale and pathways for such a transformation; the task now lies with stakeholders across the educational spectrum to implement, iterate, and sustain these much-needed reforms. The reward – an Africa that truly rises by the strength of its intellect and innovation – is well worth the effort.

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